

Script – Print – A punch in the gut

It was a little more than a year ago when country music star Toby Keith shocked fans with the news that he had been diagnosed with stomach cancer in the fall of 2021. The 62-year-old Keith revealed that he spent six months undergoing surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatments and had to cancel all of his concert dates.

But now, he's feeling better. According to Keith, he's continuing chemo, but his tumor has shrunk and his blood work has improved. So much that the singer is hoping to return to the road this fall if he continues to feel good.

Stomach cancer, also known as gastric cancer, is the growth of cancer cells in the lining and wall of the stomach. While breast, colon and prostate cancers tend to get more media attention, stomach cancer is nothing to ignore.

Stomach cancer symptoms aren't always easily identified. Feeling bloated after eating, heartburn, upper abdominal pain and unintentional weight loss are just some signs of a potential problem.

"Unfortunately, with stomach cancer, you don't see symptoms when it's early," says Katie Nagel, an oncology nurse navigator for OSF HealthCare. "But as it starts to progress, you might see some symptoms that include nausea, vomiting, you feel full quicker than you usually do, fatigue. You might notice blood in your stool. It's important to know that most of the time those don't mean cancer, but it's important to let your doctor know if those persist."

There are about 26,000 cases that occur in the United States a year including 11,000 deaths. Stomach cancer accounts for about 1.5% of all cancers.

Risk factors for stomach cancer include:

- Age - most people are diagnosed with stomach cancer in their late 60s or older
- Sex – stomach cancer is more common in men than women
- Obesity – being overweight may increase the risk of stomach cancer
- Race – stomach cancer is more common in Hispanics, African Americans and Asians

"A lot of risk factors are ones that we can control," says Nagel. "That includes smoking tobacco, heavy alcohol consumption, which is three or more drinks every day. And then a diet high in sodium and a diet high in processed meats. Obesity in general, puts you at higher risk."

If you experience any of these symptoms for more than a few weeks, Nagel stresses the importance of making an appointment with your primary care physician as soon as possible.

"Just pay attention to your body," she says. "Don't talk yourself out of letting your doctor know if you've noticed a lingering symptom or even anything that might seem small, but that might be the very early start of something that's going to get bigger. Everything is more treatable the earlier we catch it, so just listen to your body and talk to your doctor."

While there isn't screening for stomach cancer like there is for colon and breast cancer, Nagel says there are things you can do, including diet modification, exercise and avoiding a sedentary lifestyle.

The good news is incidence rates of stomach cancer have dropped about 1.5% every year in the last decade in the U.S.

Advances in the treatment of stomach cancer, which include chemotherapy, immunotherapy and surgery, have made an impact as well.

And celebrities like Toby Keith sharing their story can only help when it comes to awareness of this disease.

"That is also drawing awareness to the issue, and I think makes people feel less alone," says Nagel. "I'm not the only person in the world that has this, other people are going through something similar and makes you feel a little bit better, a little less alone."

For more information on stomach cancer, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).